

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 345

CS 206 377

AUTHOR Duncan, Patricia H.
 TITLE Developing Children's Composition Following Targeted Discussions of a Literature Selection.
 PUB DATE Mar 81
 NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Philadelphia, PA, March 1981).
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Characterization: *Descriptive Writing; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Grade 7: Junior High Schools; Literary Criticism; *Literary Devices; Literature Appreciation; Modeling (Psychology); *Narration; Teaching Methods: *Writing (Composition); *Writing Research; Writing Skills
 IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; Cohesion (Written Composition); *Reading Writing Relationship

ABSTRACT

A year-long study of the writing growth of eight seventh grade children was conducted to determine whether knowledge of reading rhetoric could be directly applied to personal writing behavior. It was assumed that active comprehension of a distinctive literary model would provide awareness of the structure of narrative prose and improve the student's own writing. Guided verbal interaction, which focused on story elements or author's styles, was designed to bring about deeper understanding of prose construction. Sequential activities were incorporated into seven steps of a "listen, discuss, write" model. Preliminary assessment of the writing samples of three of the subjects suggested that students tended toward more vitality in their writing as time progressed, using fewer words, more verbs, and more verb phrases. Students showed increased attention to the areas of coherence and characterization/detail in the second writing samples, which followed discussion on descriptive writing. The less able writers showed greater improvement using the "listen, discuss, write" procedures, but good writers also appeared to profit from the targeted discussion of narrative elements. As a result of preliminary analysis, a recommendation was made to include every attention to developing a "sense of audience" in the student writers. (RL)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

* This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

□ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

* Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

Developing Children's Composition Following Targeted Discussions of a Literature Selection

A paper presented at the annual meeting
of the Eastern Educational Research Association

Philadelphia, March 12, 1981

Patricia H. Duncan

Virginia Commonwealth University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patricia H. Duncan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED203345

This paper describes a year-long investigation of the writing growth of eight seventh grade children. The purpose of the study is to determine whether knowledge of reading rhetoric can be directly applied to personal writing behavior. An assumption underlying the study is that active comprehension of a distinctive model of literature provides awareness of the structure of narrative prose which transfers to the student's own writing. Guided verbal interaction focused on story elements or author's style bring about deeper understanding of prose construction.

Rationale:

CS 204277

The teaching of writing in elementary and middle school classrooms varies widely in terms of topics, motivation, quantity, teacher attitude, and teaching structure. Research recommendations summarized by Lickteig (1981) suggest that writing is encouraged when students have a supportive learning atmosphere which includes varied reading opportunities, discussion of experience and extensive opportunities for writing. Although Graves (1975) recommends informal writing environments for younger children with indirect teacher guidance, middle school youngsters might be expected to respond to writing activities within a more explicit instructional framework. Schiller (1970), Moore (1978), Hillerich (1979), and Blake and Spennato (1980) propose that teaching the art of writing should occur within a conceptual framework often sequenced over specifically designated time frames. Most proponents of structured teaching of composition suggest

a process which includes orientation and pre-writing experiences, idea production and generation, revision and editing, and product sharing.

The present study seeks to discover whether or not middle school students can transfer knowledge of literary models to their own creative writing. Through sequential activities which begin with appreciation of theme and continue with targeted discussion followed by writing it is assumed that:

- (1) students can grasp the elements of composition by observing the patterns employed in an excellent model, and
- (2) higher order questioning during discussion permits transfer to the student's original work

Support for the procedure devised is found in discussion of active comprehension by Singer (1978) and Pearson and Johnson (1978) who emphasize the use of modes of questioning which are directed toward problem solving and which place a premium on satisfying reader curiosity. Lundsteen (1974) also advocates group problem solving discussions in which the process is controlled but not the specific content. In this procedure questions are formed to elicit transfer of ideas. Lundsteen believes that this mode of questioning helps children to learn, "to be persistent, to feel free to be original and open minded, to empathize, to think of the 'whys' and to communicate interactively." McConaughy (1980) cites evidence that children in the early and middle grades may need the help of specific probe questioning in order to focus on higher levels of story comprehension.

Relating reading comprehension to the structure of written prose is not automatic for individuals of any age. Gage (1978) suggests that students face difficulty in thinking of writing as a rhetorical process if they have not been taught to read rhetorically. He suggests that current reading comprehension instruction makes no distinction between meaning and significance, and that

students unable to make the distinction have difficulty establishing intent in their own writing. The procedure described in this study purports to help children to make these distinctions in order to develop more fully their own composing styles.

The Writing Group

Subjects for this study are a group of eight seventh grade youngsters at St. Benedict's School, Richmond, Virginia. The group of four girls and four boys are volunteers who agree to "keep up with any work missed" in the English classes from which they are excused to attend the weekly writing workshop. Although no attempt was made to control intelligence or creativity variables, the group represents an ability range from gifted to low average and includes one diagnosed disabled reader. The students have previously had extensive instruction in traditional English grammar and literature, but have had few opportunities for creative writing. Socioeconomically, they represent the range of the white middle class in the Richmond, Virginia area.

The Procedure

The procedure used to intergrate comprehension of the literary model with writing performance employs the comprehension model of Goodman and Burke (1972) as an organizing format for questions. Verbal interaction strategies patterned after Ruddell's (1974) model elicit observations about story characters, character development, events, plot, and theme. The first literature stimulus for the discussions is Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH (O'Brien, 1971), a Newberry Award winning book selected on the basis of timely plot and theme, development of strong nonstereotyped characters, and vivid description. Schiller's (1970) model for teaching the art of writing forms the basis for the corresponding writing activities following discussion sessions. Discussion periods of 15-to-20 minutes are followed by writing periods of 15-to-20 minutes. As the writing

progresses, oral discussion is brief and informal, and writing is sustained for longer periods. No session exceeds 50 minutes in duration. Two of the sessions were videotaped for specific analysis.

The following Outline presents the procedures followed in the "Listen, Discuss, Write" approach:

Suggested Procedures for Integrating Literature and Composition: Listen, Discuss, Write.

Step One. Initial Writing

1. Overview of the approach.
(Explanation of the activities and tasks to be undertaken.)
2. Obtain a beginning writing sample or a "starter story." (15-20 minutes)
Suggestions from the "Trap Door Method," by Tom Veitsch, (1977).
3. Present a synopsis of the literature model.
Suggestion: use filmstrip or film presentation as an overview.

Step Two. Descriptive Writing

1. Review of initial writing.
Identify characters or objects to be described.
2. Ask students to listen for descriptive words (related to senses) actions that characterize the individual word patterns that convey images.
3. Read selected passages related to character or object description.
4. Discussion of author techniques.
5. Relate to a character/object in your story.
6. Write a descriptive passage about your story character/object (15 minutes).
7. Story sharing.

Step Three. Developing the Plot

1. Read passages illustrating the events which precede the plot.
2. Ask students to recall events, identify main event and note the relationship of story parts.
3. Discuss the order of events in their stories. Talk about various strategies for organizing the composition. Discuss the impact of the theme.

4. List the story events and story plot or subplots. (15 minutes)

5. Sharing.

Step Four. Elaborating the Initial Story.

1. Review previous steps taken.
2. Read "model" conclusion and share other story conclusions.
3. Discuss possible conclusions and the need to draw the story to a close after the climax.
4. Write the elaborated story (longer session).

Step Five. Critiquing the Story.

1. Students share stories in dyads or small groups and observe such aspects as vitality, logic, clarity. Changes are suggested.
2. Read story portions to focus on transitional elements, ordering.
3. Use sentence combining and paragraph linking techniques to develop fluency in student story samples.

Step Six. Refining the Vocabulary.

1. Reread literature model portions to focus on vocabulary selection.
2. Brainstorm to generate descriptive and appropriate word choices.

Step Seven. Editing and Publishing the Elaborated Story.

1. Proof and edit.
2. Present in final polished form--typed and bound.
3. Share with appropriate audience.

Post writing activities

Samples of student writing are gathered, logged, and filed at almost every session. Development of written expression is examined using holistic scoring approaches (Myers, 1980). According to Myers, Holistic scoring assumes that, "... In a writing assessment students should write, and that error counts alone cannot accurately reflect competency levels." Holistic scoring includes establishing prototypes and analyzing features within contextual frameworks. This type of analysis can yield a group profile of students showing the range of writing skill. A sample over time is needed to make a valid statement about an individual's writing competency. Criteria for feature analysis are adapted from Myers (1980) and Glazer (1972) and concentrate primarily on the elements of narrative composition.

Analysis of Writing Samples.

An examination of three writing samples reflect instruction and discussion directed to description of character and organization of story elements leading to the plot. Early samples become anchor samples for later writing. As might be expected, the wide range of initial writing ability interacts with instruction to present varied individual patterns. Growth appears to be greater for less creative students who are adding new elements to their writing as a result of instruction. Internal logic remains strong throughout and supports the necessity for careful prewriting preparation. The areas of characterization and detail show increased attention in the second writing sample, which followed focused discussion on descriptive writing. Although sentence complexity and use of dialogue vary throughout as a function of individual ability and style, sentence coherence appears to be responsive to instruction. (See Tables 1-6).

Short writing periods limit a more detailed analysis at this time. Student writing is just beginning to show evidence of attention to theme; yet most of the children have discussed thematic aspects of their stories. The short

Initial samples do not lend themselves to more quantitative analysis of discourse elements. Case study analyses of the writing samples of three students suggest that as students gain more control over their written language, they use fewer words to express their thoughts. The three subjects also use more verbs and verb phrases and tend toward more vitality in their writing as time progresses.

Discussion

Preliminary assessment of writing samples appear to confirm the procedure of "Listen, Discuss, Write," as a means of fostering the growth of composition skills for the group described. Although greater improvement is shown for less able writers, good writers also appear to profit from targeted discussion of narrative elements. Comments from students reflect a greater awareness of character description in their own composition and in the literature selections chosen for pleasure reading. Requests for extended writing periods followed the outlining of story events and beginning sessions of elaborated writing.

Prior to formal critiquing phases, students spontaneously share ideas and give each other suggestions, such as names for new characters and places, vocabulary substitutions, etc. Self evaluative comments are increasing and are directed to specific elements; for example, Kemp observed that he should change his main character from a sorcerer to an emperor to be more consistent with the plot and events. Ida decided to rewrite her initial story, keeping the same idea but changing the setting and pattern of events to, "put the story in better order." Peter has concluded that he needs more historical and geographic accuracy in his story; consequently elaborated writing has been curtailed while some library research occurs.

As the sessions continue, students engage in group interaction for purposes of revision. Sentence combining and vocabulary brainstorming sessions are

employed to increase precision of meaning and complexity of language. A second literary model, Shadow of a Bull, by Wojciechowska is currently being used to provide a stimulus for developing reflective writing.

One recommendation for future replications of the study will be to include early attention to developing a "sense of audience." Kroll (1978) and Golden (1980) emphasize the need for experiences which help children to develop awareness of the audience to whom they are writing and to adjust a piece of writing to fit a particular audience. Questions such as, "Who is going to read your story," and "What will be most interesting to them," may give children a better sense of direction during initial writing stages. Interactive group responses also provide opportunities to create audience awareness in writing.

It is anticipated that the "Listen, Discuss, Write" approach will be one way to foster growth in children's writing ability in the middle grades. By combining successful strategies from the teaching of reading and the teaching of writing teachers can help students to grasp the view that communication processes are interrelated and exist in reciprocity to one another.

Although a 50-minute weekly period is not sufficient to develop writing mastery for the students involved, it does afford the investigator consistent observation of the changes in writing growth. Future writing samples may yield more definitive data regarding the amount of transfer of knowledge from the literary model to individual writing.

Scoring Profile for Three Writing Samples

Score Values

1= none
2= little
3= much

Sample I: Initial Writing-- starter story

Sample II: Focus on character description

Sample III: Beginning Elaborated Writing

Table 1.

	Originality			Plot Beginning			Internal Logic			Detail		
	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	1	1
Anne	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2
Janice	1	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	1
Ida	2	2	2	2	2	3	1	2	3	1	3	3
Wayne	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	3
Peter	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3
Blaise	2	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Kemp	2	3		3	3		3	3		1	2	

Table 2

	Theme		
	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	2	3
Anne	1	2	3
Janice	1	2	2
Ida	3	2	1
Wayne	2	1	3
Peter	2	2	2
Blaise	2	3	3
Kemp	1	2	2

Table 3

	Settings		
	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	1	1
Anne	2	2	2
Janice	2	1	3
Ida	2	1	2
Wayne	1	1	2
Peter	3	2	3
Blaise	3	1	1
Kemp	1	2	2

Table 4

Characterization

	SI	SII	SII
Kristen	3	2	2
Anne	1	3	3
Janice	2	2	2
Ida	1	3	1
Wayne	1	3	1
Peter	1	3	2
Blaise	2	2	3
Kemp	2	2	3

Table 5

Sentence Structure

	Complexity			Coherence		
	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	2	2	2	3	3	3
Anne	3	2	2	3	2	3
Janice	1	1	1	2	2	3
Ida	1	1	1	1	2	3
Wayne	1	1	2	2	2	3
Peter	3	2	3	2	3	3
Blaise	3	3	3	3	3	3
Kemp	2	2		2	2	

Word Usage (abstract, figurative, names, variety)

Table 6

	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	1	1
Anne	3	2	2
Janice	1	3	2
Ida	1	3	2
Wayne	2	2	3
Peter	3	3	3
Blaise	3	3	3
Kemp	3	2	

Dialogue

Table 7

	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	1	1
Anne	2	3	3
Janice	1	1	2
Ida	1	1	1
Wayne	1	2	2
Peter	1	1	1
Blaise	3	3	3
Kemp	1	1	

Use of Emotional Qualities and Unusual Elements

Table 8

	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	3	3	3
Anne	2	3	3
Janice	1	2	2
Ida	3	3	3
Wayne	1	1	1
Peter	3	2	3
Blaise	3	3	3
Kemp	2	2	2

Bibliography

- Blake, H. and Spennato, N. The directed writing activity: a process with structure. Language Arts, 57, 3, March, 1980, 317-318.
- Gage, J. Conflicting assumptions about intention in teaching reading and composition. College English, 40, 3 November, 1978, 255-268.
- Glazer, J. The Development of the Glazer Narrative Composition Scale. EDRS (Ed 091 763), 1972.
- Golden, J. The writer's side: writing for a purpose and an audience. Language Arts, 57, 7, October, 1980, 756-762.
- Goodman, Y. and Burke, C. Reading Miscue Inventory Manual. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972, 23-27.
- Graves, D. An examination of the writing processes of seven year old children. Research in the Teaching of English, 9, 1975, 227-241.
- Hinnerich, R. Developing written expression: how to raise--not raze-- writers. Language Arts, 56, 7 October 1979, 769-777.
- Kroll, B. Developing a sense of audience. Language Arts, 55, 7, October, 1978, 828-831.
- Lickteig, Sr.M.J. Researched-based recommendations for teachers of writing. Language Arts, 58, 1, January 1981, 44-50.
- Lundsteen, S. Questioning to develop creative problem solving. Elementary English, May 1974, 645-650.
- McConaughy, S. Using story structure in the classroom. Language Arts, 57, 2, February 1980, 157-165.
- Moore, J. A writing week. English Journal, November 1978, 39-41.
- Myers, M. A Procedure for Writing Assessment and Holistic Scoring. ERIC/NCTE, 1980, 1-68.
- O'Brien, R. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. Atheneum, 1971.
- Pearson, D. and Johnson, D. Teaching Reading Comprehension. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978, 43-47.
- Ruddell, R. Reading-Language Instruction: Innovative Practices. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974, 399-406.
- Schiller, A. Teaching the art of writing. Scott Foresman Monograph, Scott Foresman, 1970.
- Singer, H. Active comprehension: from answering to asking questions. The Reading Teacher, 31, 8, May 1978, 901-908.
- Veitsch, T. The trapdoor method. In Zavatsky, B. and Padgett, R., The Whole Word Catalogue, New York: McGraw Hill Paperbacks, 1977, 63-67.